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Zinke defends monument reductions, supports Badger-Two Medicine

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke defended President Donald Trump's decision to shrink or modify several national monuments, saying Tuesday that opponents were lying about the real power of the federal Antiquities Act.

"The president was correct in asking for a review," Zinke said in a conference call with reporters. "Public lands are for public use and not for special interests. No land, not one square inch, has been transferred or sold. This is not about energy. There is no oil and gas assets, no mine within Bears Ears (National Monument) before or after. The claim that somehow President Trump stole land is

nefarious, false and a lie.”

Outdoor gear company Patagonia was one of the most vocal critics of Trump’s Monday announcement that Bears’ Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments would be greatly reduced in acreage. The company replaced its webpage with a black banner stating “The President Stole Your Land.”

“I think it’s shameful and appalling they would blatantly lie in order to gain money for their coffers,” Zinke said of Patagonia’s accusation. “Sound public policy is not based on threats of lawsuits. It’s based on doing what’s right.”

Patagonia hasn’t filed suit, but numerous other organizations and Indian tribes have announced legal challenges to Zinke’s recommendations.

In the same call, Zinke repeated an earlier proposal to create a new monument in Montana protecting the Badger-Two Medicine region surrounded by the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.

“I think there’s a really great opportunity for the Badger-Two Medicine as the number of crowds and visitors continue to break records in Glacier,” Zinke said. “Here’s a virtually untapped area and a chance to do it right. There’s the possibility of revenue from tourism and an untapped culture. I think it’s deserving of monument

status.”

The Badger-Two Medicine area has been controversial since the 1980s, when Reagan Administration officials granted energy exploration leases there without proper environmental review or consultation with the Blackfeet Tribe.

Federal court decisions have found the leases invalid and a lengthy review of the area’s cultural significance to the Blackfeet declared it worthy of protected status. Blackfeet tribal leaders personally pitched their concern for the Badger-Two Medicine to Zinke at a ceremony in Glacier National Park just days after he was named Interior secretary.

On the press call, Zinke said the nation was better served to be “energy dominant” by developing public lands for oil, gas, coal and other natural resources. But he added he had a track record of opposing energy development and mines where they weren’t appropriate.

“I want to make sure there’s no takings” in the Badger-Two Medicine, Zinke said. “There’s a deal to be made on how to retire those leases. I grew up in the foothills of Glacier Park. I have great respect for the Blackfeet Nation. That area is sacred to the Blackfeet.”